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DE RUEHLB #0988/01 2461521  
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P 031521Z SEP 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5657  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3585  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4119  
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000988

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DEPT FOR IO A/S EBRIMMER  
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DRL/NESA FOR JBARGHOUT  
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NSC FOR DSHAPIRO/MMCDERMOTT  
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OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/02/2019

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SUBJECT: HARIRI WILL PRESENT CABINET PROPOSAL WITHOUT  
FURTHER OPPOSITION CONSULTATION

REF: BEIRUT 984

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri told the Ambassador September 3 that he intends to present a national unity government cabinet proposal to President Sleiman within the next ten days. He confirmed that that negotiations with opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement had reached a dead end. Hariri remained steadfast in his opposition to offer Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil a ministry. Hariri was bracing himself for the possibility that Sleiman might reject the draft list or -- should he approve it -- that Hizballah and its opposition allies would refuse to participate in the government. However, neither he nor his advisor and cousin Nader Hariri believed Hizballah would necessarily resort to violence. Hariri once more urged the U.S. to pressure Syria to halt its efforts to "hollow out" the GOL. Hariri's current posture is a risky step forward, but we expect the president is ready to support him. We assess that Hariri's proposal may also be a high-stakes attempt to clear the decks and start cabinet formation talks anew. End Summary.

SAAD TO SUBMIT CABINET DRAFT  
BY SEPTEMBER 12  
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2. (C) Negotiations with Michel Aoun's FPM have reached a dead end, PM-designate Hariri told the Ambassador and polchief at Qoreitem on September 3. He intends to present a cabinet proposal within the next ten days to the president without further consultation with the opposition. The list he presents will include the ministries allotted to each party as well as any specific names he has received in the course of negotiations. "We have a chance of doing it," Hariri claimed in light of "positive" signals that he has received from the president's office.

3. (C) Hariri reiterated that he welcomed having the opposition take place in a national unity government, but that the opposition's participation could not be governed by

preconditions. "We are saying you are a minority," Hariri insisted; the elections had provided the majority a mandate "and we will take action." Nevertheless, Hariri was not yet sure if the president would sign the decree. If he signs it, the cabinet will proceed with drafting a ministerial statement. If not, Hariri will seek re-appointment as prime minister-designate and begin cabinet formation negotiations again. (Note: In a meeting with Ambassador September 2, Presidential Advisor Naji Abi Assi confirmed that Sleiman was ready to "facilitate" this process. He judged it possible that Sleiman would sign off on a list proposed by Hariri if it were reasonable, but suggested that the idea be "floated" further in the media -- septel. End Note.)

SAAD STILL REFUSING BASSIL  
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14. (C) The anticipated September 2 meeting between Bassil and Hariri to re-energize negotiations was a failure, in Hariri's opinion (reftel). Bassil, who Hariri claimed demanded the ministry of the interior for the FPM only as a bargaining chip, refused Hariri's offer to the party of the ministries of social affairs and agriculture (currently held by the FPM) in addition to the education ministry (currently held by Future) and the labor ministry (now held by Hizballah). Hariri reported that Bassil rejected the labor ministry and insisted on his own inclusion in the government. Hariri adamantly insisted that allowing Bassil, who lost his seat in the June 7 parliamentary elections, to return to the cabinet in any capacity remained "out of the question." Such a move would open a Pandora's box of claims by other failed

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candidates in both the opposition and the majority, Saad believed. (Note: By contrast, Abi Assi had claimed the night before that President Sleiman had no objection to Bassil returning to the cabinet. End note.)

HARIRI'S REASON VIOLENCE UNLIKELY  
IF A MAJORITY GOVERNMENT IS SUBMITTED  
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15. (C) Hariri derided Hizballah as the "bastards" who are encouraging Aoun's recalcitrance by threatening to remove their support for Aoun if he reached a deal with Hariri. Although he estimated an 80% chance that Hizballah and the opposition would refuse to participate, backing up Aoun, Hariri downplayed the chance of a violent reaction, reasoning that "applying the constitution is not a provocation." For his part, Nader Hariri questioned whether it was a fait accompli that Hizballah would refuse to participate, as "they will have important ministries for prominent personalities." Nader assessed that Hizballah will not go to the streets over Gebran Bassil, but both Hariris agreed that Hizballah is likely to boycott the government, should the president agree to Hariri's proposal. In such a case, the cabinet could still be formed, they asserted. If the proposed Shia minister in the five-man presidential bloc, Adnan as-Sayyed Hussein, refused to participate as well, cabinet formation would also begin anew, Hariri said.

U.S. SHOULD PRESSURE SYRIA  
TO KEEP ITS HAND OUT OF LEBANON  
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16. (C) The Ambassador asked Hariri how the U.S. could best support the process; Hariri cautioned that any proposal should not "look like an American plan." In the meantime, Hariri called on the USG to pressure Syria to halt its efforts to "hollow out" the GOL and the Lebanese Armed Forces by obstructing cabinet formation. "Excessive" U.S. engagement with the SARG had encouraged Damascus to manipulate Lebanon to make it a stronger card in Syria's hand, he alleged. Saudi King Abdallah is not pressuring any course of action, Hariri reported, noting he would likely visit Saudi Arabia for the Eid holiday later in the month.

COMMENT

17. (C) Given the president's inclination to support Hariri (septel), he would likely sign a decree that included the names of opposition ministers discussed during consultations. The opposition would see a draft list that bypasses its approval as provocative, however, and potentially counterproductive. Hariri's concerns about Hizballah withdrawing its participation in a majority government are measured, but we are not as confident that Hizballah would not resort to violence in response. Additionally, Hariri has not considered the possible negative public reaction from the Christian population that supports Michel Aoun, who won nearly 50% of the Christian vote in the elections.

18. (C) However, we also assess that Hariri's brinksmanship may actually be a high-stakes attempt to clear the decks and start cabinet formation talks anew. If the opposition's ten potential ministers refuse to play along and are joined by Hussein -- as seems nearly assured -- Hariri will not have the two-thirds majority required for major cabinet decisions. As both Hariris acknowledged, this will lead to a renomination process and the return to starting talks from scratch. The prime minister-designate has continued to remind the public in his nightly iftar remarks, televised several times a week since the start of Ramadan, that while the opposition has the right to make whatever requests it desires, the electorate's choice -- the majority -- needs to be respected.

SISON